

490 North Meridian Road Kalispell, MT 59901

Investigation of Suppression of Walleye in Noxon Rapids Reservoir Decision Notice

July 30, 2013

Proposal

FWP proposes to suppress illegally introduced walleye in Noxon Rapids Reservoir in the Lower Clark Fork drainage.

Montana Environmental Policy Act Process (MEPA)

A draft environmental assessment was released for 30 days of public comment on February 28, 2013, through March 29, 2013. The public comment was extended for an additional 21 days through April 19, 2013. A public meeting was held in Thompson Falls, Montana, on March 19, 2013.

<u>Summary of Issues Addressed in the Environmental Assessment</u>

The environmental assessment addressed the illegal introduction of the walleye and pertinent FWP policies, potential impacts of walleye on the multi-agency Native Salmonid Restoration Plan, potential impacts on popular recreational fisheries, and the sudden increase in walleye abundance, as well as factors that determine walleye year class strength.

Summary of Public Comments and Decision Notice

Following is a summary of public comments received.

- E-mail 329 opposed, 70 support.
- Hard copy -30 opposed (many were copies that were received digitally), 2 support.
- Form letters Received 3 form letters, all collected following the public meeting, most people signed 2 or 3.
- Petitions Seven were received. Included in this count are the forms signed at the State Walleyes Unlimited banquet. Some comments were written on these forms.

The MEPA public involvement process is designed to disclose issues and consequences of actions; it is not a public vote as such. At the same time, FWP does take note of and acknowledges the sentiment of public comments received. Of more value are those comments that raise substantive issues, and several were received. Substantive issues raised include the origin of the walleye, potential bycatch of nontarget species in suppression efforts, funding availability, walleye removal techniques, and the economic impacts of both allowing walleye to establish in the lower Clark Fork and the consequences of removal attempts.

Based on the numerous questions, comments and information requests received throughout the EA process, I believe a revised draft environmental assessment should be prepared to address these issues and provide additional information.

Specifically, walleye suppression is unprecedented to date in western Montana. If walleye suppression is adopted in the future, it certainly does commit FWP to future actions. That is, the very nature of suppression projects is that they extend beyond the initial removal of fish. If successful, ongoing suppression is likely as eradication of the targeted species (walleye in this instance) is difficult using today's technology.

In the past, we have assembled a subcommittee of our regional Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) to help guide us through difficult issues, the most recent example being the South Fork Flathead Westslope Cutthroat Trout Restoration Project. Once again, we propose to take advantage of this credible group on the Noxon effort.

FWP will strive in the EA to format and assemble the information in a manner that will invite public reading and understanding of the primary issues and consequences.

Despite a majority in opposition to this project, I believe we are compelled to consider suppression efforts based on threats posed to established fisheries, including native westslope cutthroat and bull trout, and potential impacts to the ongoing multi-agency Native Salmonid Restoration Plan in the Lower Clark Fork drainage. The establishment of walleye is also in conflict with the FWP Illegal and Unauthorized Fish Introduction Policy and the Fish and Wildlife Commission policy against managing walleye west of the Continental Divide. However, those policies also provide the agency with discretion to evaluate the feasibility of control projects. That is the purpose of the upcoming EA. Despite seven other documented illegal walleye introductions west of the Divide, only Noxon Reservoir has a self-sustaining population. As such, it can become a source for other illegal plants. Therefore, a new EA will take a more comprehensive look at all the Lower Clark Fork reservoirs: Thompson Falls, Noxon, and Cabinet Gorge. This will preclude the need for additional environmental analysis should walleye become established anywhere else in the drainage.

In the interim, and to better inform the Department and the public of the strategies available and potential impacts, sampling of the walleye population will continue. These efforts will include spring electrofishing, short-term gillnetting with a variety of mesh sizes, seining, and hoop, trammel, fyke, and Merwin traps. Most captured walleye will be tagged and released to measure angler exploitation. Gravid females will be stripped of eggs to measure fecundity. Some walleye will be sacrificed to study food habits and to validate aging techniques. Sacrificed walleye will be donated to local food banks if they are within food consumption limits. Results of ongoing sampling will be incorporated into the draft EA.

James R. Sattafield, Jr.

Date: July 30, 2013

James R. Satterfield Jr., Ph.D. Regional Supervisor